



GUIDE DEFENCE · 10 MIN READ

Certifications for defence industry suppliers

ISO 9001, AQAP, security clearance and export control: which certifications and approvals suppliers to the defence/armaments industry require.

ISO 9001 as the basic qualification

ISO 9001 certification is the indispensable foundation for every supplier looking to enter the defence industry. Without a certified quality management system (QMS), admission to the supplier pools of major defence groups is practically impossible. The standard calls for process-oriented thinking, risk-based planning and continual improvement — principles that carry particular weight in the safety-critical defence industry.

- Documented processes: all quality-relevant procedures must be described, implemented and verifiable
- Risk management: systematic identification and assessment of risks in the supply chain and in production
- Supplier evaluation: your own suppliers must be assessed and monitored — the chain must not break
- Control of measuring equipment: all testing and measuring equipment must be calibrated and documented with traceability
- Management review: regular assessment of the QMS by senior management

Note: Time and cost involved — Implementing a QMS to ISO 9001 typically takes a medium-sized company 6 to 12 months. Certification costs range from 5,000 to 15,000 euros, depending on company size and certification body. The annual surveillance audits cost approximately 3,000 to 6,000 euros. The investment pays for itself quickly through access to defence industry contracts.

AQAP — NATO quality standards

The Allied Quality Assurance Publications (AQAP) are the NATO-specific quality standards that go beyond ISO 9001. They are monitored by the national quality assurance offices — in Germany by the Bundeswehr quality assurance offices (Güteprüfstellen, GüPrSt) of the BAaINBw. AQAP conformity is not a separate certification; it is required as part of the contract award and verified by the GüPrSt.

- AQAP 2110: quality assurance requirements for design, development and production — the most comprehensive level
- AQAP 2120: quality assurance requirements for production — where no design responsibility is held
- AQAP 2130: quality assurance requirements for inspection and final testing — the minimum requirement
- AQAP 2310: NATO requirements for quality assurance in software development
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Government Quality Assurance (GQA): state quality inspection by the quality assurance office — the client has right of access to the plant

Note: In practice: working with the quality assurance office — The quality assurance office (GüPrSt) is not an adversary but a partner. For contracts carrying an AQAP requirement, the responsible GüPrSt contacts the supplier and arranges an audit. Prepare by supplementing your ISO 9001 documentation with the AQAP-specific requirements: configuration management, first article inspection (FAI to AS9102) and extended test records.

Security clearance and security screening

Not every defence contract requires security clearance — but many do. As soon as a supplier is granted access to classified information (Verschlussachen, VS), it must take part in the security clearance procedure. The Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWE, BMWK until 2025) is responsible for security clearance in industry. The security screening applies both to the company and to individual employees.

- VS-NfD (restricted, for official use only): the lowest level, requiring a security clearance notice and internal classified information instructions
- VS-Vertraulich (confidential): requires an Ü1 security screening of the employees concerned
- VS-Geheim (secret): requires the extended Ü2 security screening, including interviews with the individual's contacts
- NATO classifications: NATO RESTRICTED, NATO CONFIDENTIAL, NATO SECRET — require an additional NATO security clearance agreement
- Facility Security Clearance: the company itself must obtain a security clearance notice from the BMWK

Note: Timing of the security clearance procedure — Completing a security clearance procedure for the first time takes 6 to 18 months. The security screening of individual employees (Ü1) takes 3 to 6 months; Ü2 can take 6 to 12 months. Factor this lead time into your business development — a contract requiring security clearance cannot be accepted at short notice if the procedure has not yet been completed.

Export control and dual-use

Suppliers of components or materials can also be affected by export control. The Foreign Trade and Payments Act (AWG), the Foreign Trade and Payments Ordinance (AWV) and the War Weapons Control Act (KrWaffKontrG) form the national framework. At EU level, the Dual-Use Regulation (EU) 2021/821 governs the export of dual-use goods. Suppliers must check whether their products are listed or are subject to an export restriction within the customer's end product.

- Export list (AWV Annex AL): the national list of goods requiring a licence — it also covers high-temperature materials and ceramics
- EU dual-use list (Annex I of Regulation 2021/821): the EU-wide harmonised list of goods with technical thresholds
- War weapons list (annex to the KrWaffKontrG): war weapons and their essential components — the highest licensing level
- Catch-all clause: even unlisted goods can require a licence if the user or the intended use is critical
- Internal Compliance Programme (ICP): the company's internal organisation for complying with export control regulations

Note: Practical example: refractory materials in export control — Certain high-performance ceramics, carbon fibre composites and graphite grades are covered by the EU dual-use list. For example, fibre-reinforced composite ceramics with a service temperature above 1,600 °C and a density below 2.0 g/cm³ require a licence under list number 1C007. Check your product range against the technical thresholds — in case of doubt, BAFA (the Federal Office for Economic Affairs and Export Control) provides advice.

Documentation and evidence obligations

Documentation requirements in the defence industry go far beyond what is usual in civil industry. Every material, every batch and every process step must be documented without gaps and remain traceable throughout the entire service life of the end product — often 30 to 50 years in the case of weapon systems.

- Inspection certificates to DIN EN 10204 type 3.1 or 3.2: material composition, mechanical properties, test results
- First article inspection report (FAIR) to AS9102 / VDA: complete measurement and documentation of the first production part
- Batch tracking: from the raw material supplier through to the installation point in the end product — no gaps permitted
- Deviation management: every deviation from the specification must be documented, assessed and released by the client
- Retention periods: at least 10 years, and for weapon systems often for the entire period of use (30+ years)

Standards and regulations

ISO 9001:2015

Quality management system — requirements (Basic certification, the minimum requirement for all defence industry suppliers)

AQAP 2110

NATO QA Requirements for Design, Development and Production (Mandatory for direct contracts from the Bundeswehr or NATO partners)

AQAP 2120

NATO QA Requirements for Production (For pure production operations without their own design responsibility)

AS9100D

QMS for the aviation, space and defence industries (Relevant when supplying the aerospace sector)

SÜG

Security Screening Act (Sicherheitsüberprüfungsgesetz) (Legal basis for Ü1/Ü2 screenings of employees)

AWG/AWV

Foreign Trade and Payments Act and Ordinance (National legal basis for export control)

Frequently asked questions

As a small supplier, do I really need AQAP certification?

AQAP is not a formal certification but a requirement laid down in the contract. You need an ISO 9001-certified QMS as the basis and must meet the AQAP-specific additional requirements. The quality assurance office verifies conformity as part of the contract. To get started as a tier 3 supplier, ISO 9001 is often sufficient — the AQAP requirements are then built up step by step.

How long does it take to obtain all the certifications?

ISO 9001: 6–12 months. Security clearance procedure: 6–18 months. Employee security screening: 3–12 months. In total, you should allow 12 to 24 months to build up full supplier qualification. Start with ISO 9001 and initiate the security clearance procedure in parallel.

What does it cost to build up the compliance structure?

Costs vary depending on the initial situation. For a medium-sized company with 50–100 employees: ISO 9001 implementation and certification approx. 15,000–30,000 euros. Security clearance facilities (secure area, document management): 10,000–50,000 euros. Export control consultancy and setting up an ICP: 5,000–20,000 euros. Ongoing costs for audits and training: 10,000–20,000 euros per year.

Let us talk about your project

Reply within 24 hours on working days.

info@sbs-rs.de

+49 89 541 960 209 Read online: www.sbs-rs.de/defense-industrie/ratgeber/zertifizierungen-defense-zulieferer